

[Review] Bronner, Stephen Eric (2014) Moments of decision: political history and the crises of radicalism (2nd edition)

Article (Published Version)

Harris, Neal (2017) [Review] Bronner, Stephen Eric (2014) Moments of decision: political history and the crises of radicalism (2nd edition). Studies in Social and Political Thought, 27. ISSN 1467-2219

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/74426/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Moments of Decision: Political History and the Crises of Radicalism (2nd edition)

by Stephen Eric Bronner

Bloomsbury Publishing 2014, pbk £17.99 (ISBN: 9781623567002), 191pp.

By Neal Harris

'Activists today are profoundly lacking a sense of their intellectual traditions and the historical circumstances in which past struggles were fought' (Bronner, 2014: vii): so states Stephen Eric Bronner in his introduction to the second edition of *Moments of Decision*. Such hypostatized activists need bear no such indictment if they enjoy even a cursory engagement with Bronner's lively, incisive and interdisciplinary work, comprising part history-lesson, part theoretical exegesis. This is not just a book for activists: *Moments of Decision* offers a candid and potent analysis of some of the most intense contestations for progressive politics in the 20th and 21st centuries and will be of interest to scholars of foreign policy, social theory, politics, governance and social philosophy. Bronner's updated and expanded edition of this 1992 tract seeks to apply an equally critical lens to the new historical constellations of today while meliorating the unavoidable refractions of passing kairos and chronos on his earlier analyses. The most substantial modification to the first edition is the inclusion of three new chapters, offering (i) an interrogation of the 'transformative moments' of 1989, 9/11 and the Arab Spring (chapter seven), (ii) an analysis of the variegated Western political contestations of 2012 (chapter eight), and (iii) a new final chapter, offering an exposition of a somewhat inchoate framework for judging contemporary geopolitical engagements.

Bronner's work is to be commended for its sophisticated appreciation of the interplay of contingency and structure as evinced in intense political contestation, or, as the author prefers, an appreciation of 'the dialectic of choices made by what were deemed radical progressive movements in the context of powerful institutional constraints' (Ibid.: vii). With his strident rejection of 'path dependency' theories, and his repeated contention that there are usually solid reasons why a particular political choice gains ascendancy, Bronner consistently reasserts the importance of political agency at 'moments of decision'. This sensitivity to the 'contingency-structural axes' is articulated through: (a) a striking appreciation of the political component of progressive struggle, and (b) the production of insightful 'subjunctive histories', charting and exploring the possibilities open to radical actors

during said crises.

Where Bronner's quill moves to cover this 'what may have been' aspect of his analysis, the reader might rightly feel some initial disquiet. As a methodology, 'subjunctive history' carries a decided risk of stranding the author in a position akin to Robert Frost's traveller in *The Road Not Taken*, paralysed by thoughts of spectral futures extrapolated from fictional pasts. Bronner, however, manages to utilise this medium with no such ill consequence. Be it his discussion of the choices available to the SPD in 1919, Leon Blum in 1936, the SDS in the 1960s, or Obama in 2008, Bronner raises potentialities as catalysts for a deeper, penetrative critique, of the once existing situation. Through his analysis of these roads not taken the broader array of choices available to past progressives is drawn out, and the structural and contingent reasons for their negation are explored and exposed. With the articulation of both the agonistic and consensual aspects of these seminal political crises, Bronner rightly draws out the refreshing reality that 'the subaltern always has a role to play in shaping its fate' (Ibid.: xiii).

Moments of Decision is a frank and self-reflexively partisan work. Bronner's socialist and democratic sympathies flow seamlessly throughout his analyses; and while his strident support for a gradualist republican-socialist transition, à la Luxemburg, was briefly acknowledged in the first edition, it is now explicitly triumphed in the first of the additional chapters (Chapter Seven). Bronner applies an explicitly Luxemburgist imaginary to the crises points of 1989 and The Arab Spring in a highly engaging analysis. Luxemburg's notion of a 'cosmopolitan pedagogy' of oppressed groups, learning from, and responding to, each other, 'in an ongoing revolutionary process' (Ibid.: 139) seems an entirely pertinent rubric to adopt when examining these dynamic, interwoven international challenges to authoritarian hegemony. Yet Luxemburg's faith (echoed by Bronner) in the possibility of socio-economic structural change deriving from the spread of an antecedent democratic consciousness, could have been more thoroughly interrogated. As Bronner admits, 'now there is counter-revolution and despair!' (Ibid.: 139): the attempt to instill democratic governance failed and the prospect of a socialist transition seems even more distant. An acknowledgment of the need to critically consider new forms of engagement more directly confrontational to the realities of power concentration, both stato-centric and beyond, would have been pleasing to have encountered.

The final chapter, *The Future is Now*, proves both fascinating and infuriating, and seems slightly out of keeping with the style and content of the rest of the work. The focus is an articulation of a rubric for analysis, which Bronner proceeds to blood against contemporary political

contestations. In a newly bifurcated frame, Bronner argues that progressive struggles with power are best considered with simultaneous reference to 'Political realism' and 'Human Rights'. It is 'the interplay between human rights and political realism which shapes the criteria and the basic questions that citizens should be asking in judging ... policy' (Ibid.: 165). Bronner proceeds to draw out six questions to probe which he thinks best operationalise this heuristic framing: (i) Is there a strategic goal? (ii) What is the ethical purpose? (iii) Is there sustainable public support? (iv) Is it clear who benefits? (v) Are there double standards being imposed? (vi) Does one see the arrogance of power at work? While it is undeniable that Bronner's application of this analytic to the Iraq War (2003 -) proves incisive, the frustrations arising from this chapter lay in the lack of any substantial meta-analysis. Why does Bronner focus on these two considerations as a priority? How does one move from an interest in these considerations to his chosen six questions? Why is this approach preferable to alternate schemas for analysis? The liberal focus on politico-legal rights, rather than 'socio-economic' rights, is not considered, and how such socio-economic concerns are dealt with under Bronner's suggested framing seems underdeveloped.

Even with *The Future is Now* begging some questions, all chapters in Bronner's second edition of *Moments of Decision* make for thought-provoking and enlightening reading. With the work's sophisticated handling of contingency and structure, Bronner succeeds in charting a historiography in keeping with Marx's assertion in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* that 'men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please'. The work offers its most penetrative analysis when it sticks to its strengths: socialist historiography in the form of a critical analysis of the relation between progressive movements and the contingent and structural impediments to the realisation of their goals. Bronner's encyclopaedic knowledge, his articulate, sophisticated and timely argumentation, makes *Moments of Decision* an important work for all those with an interest in reviving a truly progressive political agenda.

Neal Harris (n.harris@sussex.ac.uk) is a Ph.D. candidate and Doctoral Tutor at the University of Sussex and a Visiting Lecturer at the University of Brighton. His research interests include Critical Theory, Cosmopolitanism, and Ecologism. His doctoral research into social pathology diagnosis is supervised by Professor Gerard Delanty and Dr. James Hardie-Bick.